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International relations, world views and disciplinary contexts: reflections on theoretical choices[1]

Milja Kurki

Hiski Haukkala in his introductory paper suggests that deeper thought should be paid to the subject of theory choice in the study of international relations. Specifically, he implies that the causes, or reasons, behind individual researcher's theory choices may be rather poorly understood as things stand. Theory choice is, indeed, an important subject, for theoretical choices are ubiquitous in our study of international. We engage in theory choice when we choose the concepts we use to describe the world, when we reflect on how we apply them in analysis of empirical realities, and when we compare different analyses. Theory is everywhere: there is no such thing as an a-theoretical perspective on the world (see e.g. Dunne, Kurki and Smith, 2009). It follows that theory choices are part of everyday practice in studying and researching international relations.

Yet, as Haukkala correctly notes, theory choice is also an elusive matter to explain. While theoretical choices are constantly made, it is difficult to get a handle on why exactly we make different theoretical choices. Why do I choose a historically materialist frame of reference in studying globalization, while my colleague in the office next to me opts for a liberal, or a constructivist, framework? Why are some theories more attractive to us than others and why do we end up making the choices we do with regard to theoretical perspectives? These are difficult questions to answer, and ones that many philosophers of science have struggled with throughout the 20th century. The most noted debates in philosophy of science have in fact revolved around the issue of theory choice. The exchanges between Popperian (1959), Lakatosian (1970) and Kuhnian (1996) approaches to explaining scientific progress were, for example, closely tied to investigation of why scientists come to make particular theoretical choices at particular times. Had Kuhn been right about scientists being directed by their sociological disciplinary context, Popperian hopes for an epistemically objective science would have been severely undermined. The

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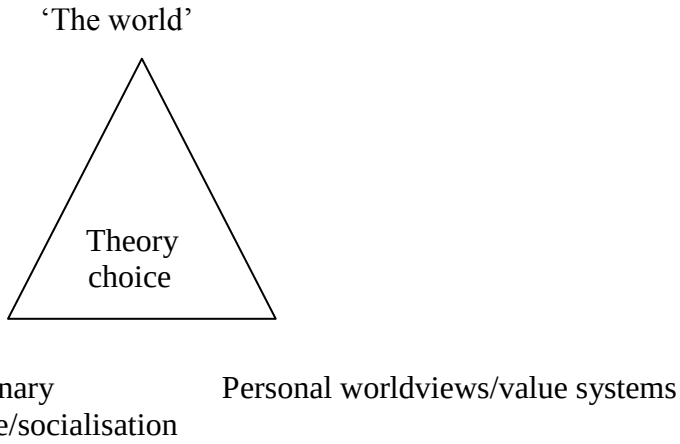
credibility, and indeed, the 'soul of science' (Fuller, 2005) is at stake in how we explain theory choice.

Yet, perspectives on theory choice have tended to revolve around particular perspectives, as Hiski Haukkala also suggests. The 'epistemic' and 'disciplinary sociology' perspectives, in sum the Kuhnian and Popperian perspectives, have been dominant. As a result, certain kinds of considerations have been sidelined in debates on theory choice. Crucially, it seems that the role of personal world-views and backgrounds of scientists or researchers has been paid scant attention – despite the fact that such level of analysis might most plausibly provide us with reasons for why scientists do what they do, and especially for why they often 'feel attracted' to certain theories because they 'feel right'. While Popperians have noted the role of personal 'biases', they have sought to limit their influence through subjecting theory choice to rigorous evidential and logical tests. Also, while the Kuhnians have studied the role of disciplinary socialization, they have failed to deeply analyze the role that non-scientific personal contexts and world-views have in shaping theory choices, focusing on disciplinary discourses and influences.

This forum seeks to raise the possibility that analysis of personal worldviews may be productive in explaining theory choice. Drawing on Hiski Haukkala's paper, I seek to here analyze theory choice in reference to a causal framework that integrates personal perspectives with consideration of disciplinary socialization and the role of 'the world'. As indicated in the stylized model below, I trace the dynamics between these three (ideal type) factors.

Figure 1. Three-fold influences on theory choice



I will do so in relation to a concrete context that I know well, although far from thoroughly – my own personal experiences. As Haukkala suggests, to understand theory choices it may be productive to engage with concrete explanatory contexts for theory choices, rather than mere abstract level of debate. I take up his challenge here – even if this is uncomfortable and risky. It is uncomfortable because revealing one's personal experiences and background values in a public setting feels not only unscientific but

renders one vulnerable to various accusations of bias. It is risky too, because it risks researchers engaging in self-indulgent drivel on their personal experiences. Also, it is inevitable that our personal narratives with regard to our own life-experience often reflect idealized story-lines with regard to our lives.

Despite these problems, such a perspective does reveal some interesting insights. I argue here that it shows that personal world-views can indeed be seen as deeply informative on theory choice, yet their influence is far from uniform or straightforward. Indeed, personal background factors – which I take here to be general 'value-systems' of researchers – can often be overwhelmed by other explanatory factors, disciplinary socialization in particular. Indeed, I argue that there may be significant clashes within one's research between one's world view and one's disciplinary social position, which may lead to rather 'alienated' researchers and research agendas. Indeed, I would suggest that the alienation of a researcher's political worldview from the disciplinary discourse is an increasingly frequent situation - and rather than being a positive development (as some Popperians might assume) is, I argue, a potentially disenabling development for future IR research. I argue then for facilitation of 'holistic selves' in IR research: pursuing of research strategies and interests which correspond and facilitate, rather than hinder, the coming together of one's personal world-view and disciplinary work.

I advance such an agenda for academic reasons but with a very personal context in mind. Indeed, it is important to note that the arguments made here are motivated by a personal as well as an academic context. In recent years I have become increasingly frustrated with the realization that there seems to be an unconstructively apolitical veneer to my own academic work on philosophy of science and international relations theory, a veneer which not only hides from me and others the politics of my research, but also moreover, by hiding my politics, disenables my research to have the political impact I would like it to have. As a result, I have started to dig into my own political orientations and world view and how that is or can be built into the theoretical work that I do (see e.g. Kurki, 2009). This short article is an opportunity to dig further into some of the very complex interactions between personal backgrounds, socialization and theory choice.

I will analyse my own theoretical choices in two steps. I start with a static picture that traces out in very general terms the core elements that my world view, disciplinary context and world political context consist in. This will give us some general orientations in approaching the subject of theory choice. Yet, as we will see, this is in and of itself far too general and static a picture and hence a more dynamic historical narrative is necessary.

Orientations to IR statically analysed: world views, disciplinary context and 'ir'

What are the roles of the three general explanatory factors in my own research? Let me, first, make a few brief comments about how I see the role of these factors in my case.

Let us start with the 'world'. How has the context of the 'world', developments in international relations and world politics themselves, shaped my own theoretical choices? In a fairly secondary manner, it would seem to me. While of course we all learn about international politics in the context of 'the world', the role of the world in directing our theory choices is by no means straightforward. In my case, it is clear that the challenges that the post-Cold War international scene threw up had in certain senses a foundational role in directing the kinds of things I was interested in, and the basic conceptual premises of study. I started studying IR in the late 1990s when the initial enthusiasm for a liberal post-Cold War order was still strong, but became progressively more circumspect. While institutional integration and multilateralism still concerned most students and teachies, and while questions of human rights, democracy promotion and humanitarian intervention played a key role in shaping world politics, a triumphalist liberal position was increasingly modified and subjected to critique. My own studies of international relations were clearly shaped by this inter-regnum: I was highly focused on analysis of these key problematiques and influenced by the general liberal institutionalist and universalist frames of mind that dominated among international actors at the time. Yet, 'the world' also pointed a student of international politics to also engage with the challenges to the liberal agenda of human rights and humanitarian intervention.

The role of this general world political context in determining theory choice seems, however, while indicative, rather poor in explanatory terms. This is because, on reflection, it is very difficult to separate the role of the 'world' from the role of the disciplinary context in explaining theory choice. Indeed, more than 'the world' itself, I believe that my theory choices were and have been strongly influenced through the learning framework within which I was introduced to the subject, which then determined the 'kind of world' I came to see and study.

Indeed, on reflection, a more crucial explanatory factor for my theory choices is the disciplinary social context within which I came to understand what international politics was about, in short the influence of the disciplinary socialization on my thinking. The disciplinary context in my case was defined by my socialization into the subject matter through the lens of classical Anglo-American 'International Relations' scholarship. I was trained initially at Hull University and later at the department of International Politics at Aberystwyth. At both universities 'Anglo-American' stories of the discipline – of what 'IR' is about – have been dominant, as have been a set of theoretical perspectives which focus our analysis on specific levels of analysis.

It is notable, for example, that in the UK, IR is a distinct discipline which stands apart from political science, sociology or economics (the disciplinary status is here different from American understanding of IR as a subdiscipline of political science or its status as an interdisciplinary set of inquiries in many continental systems). IR in the UK is also a discipline which is, or was, dominated by very specific schools of thought and debates (which also tend to bolster the disciplinary view of IR). Classical IR schools, especially the English School but also liberalism and realism as its debating partners, are influential in the UK. Key focus of analysis is traditionally the international order, diplomatic exchanges between leaders and the role of shared 'institutional' or 'cultural' norms

between them in shaping their interactions. It is notable that in the UK 'IR' tends to be separated as a discipline from political science and classically also from political economy, and hence while a small historically materialist sector exists within the discipline, much of this is in the sidelines of IR.

It is also notable, however, that in the last ten years the UK IR scene has tended to be fairly pluralist in nature, with representation of normative theory, critical theory and poststructuralist orientations providing a set of niche markets. This disciplinary context – both in emphasis on IR as a distinct discipline of international relations, centred around analysis of the role of institutions and normative frameworks, and in emphasis on theoretical pluralism – has been an important one and has shaped my thinking in a foundational way. Having been trained at Aberystwyth and with Steve Smith (see e.g. 1997), a vociferous advocate of theoretical pluralism in IR, I tend to be a pluralistic in my approach to theoretical perspectives in IR, yet I have tended to work within the discipline of 'IR' in a way that is perhaps perceived as rather narrow by some of the more inter-disciplinary colleagues on the continent.

Finally, let us deal with the suggestion is that there is a personal and social world-view and value-context at play in determining our theoretical orientations. I think such a general world-view does play a role, although deciphering its role has been rather difficult. In my case, I think personal world views take the shape of a generic social democratic value- and interest- orientation. I was brought up in Finland in a deeply social democratic family, with typical social democratic values of equality and solidarity being preached at home. My parents were, if not exactly active political agitators for the SDP, long-term advocates of social democratic left, and in the case of my father also previously participants in the more radical 1960s student left. My family on both sides comes from the 'red' city of Kotka, my parents having both been born to working class families, whose lives revolved around 'the docks' and the 'Enzo Guzeit' mill.

I think it would be silly not to recognize that this background has had an impact on my thinking (and unlike Jyrki Kakonen (see below) I was not a rebellious child that rejected parental influence). I think my basic worldview has been built on values that called for political, economic and gender equality and general politics of solidarity within societies. It glorified hard work, stressed the importance of high levels of taxation and the solidity of working class family values. As a result, I think I have always been rather skeptical of individualist and market driven approaches to politics, with emphasis on social values and social interactions governing social life. This background was, I think, foundational in my family life, and was not directly challenged in school because of the general influence of such values in Finnish society in the 1980s.

Running through these three factors provides one with some interesting initial orientations in analyzing theory choice. Yet, such a static and general analysis of factors provides a rather vague story line, and gives little indication of how the different causal factors have interacted through the years. Let us now examine some of the causal dynamics – and tensions – one could identify in explaining theory choice.

Dynamics and tensions

What is interesting about the background conditions of theory choice is that the influence different factors changes over time. Let me indulge in some personal historical reflections to demonstrate how my own views have shifted and how shifts in background conditions seem to be related to such shifts.

I started my academic career at Hull University. As a first year student it is not a surprise that you become very easily influenced by new ways of thinking that you encounter. For me this influence was universalistic forms of liberalism, specifically in the solidarist English School sense. 'Saving Strangers', expanding the sphere of human rights, and achieving global institutional reform were things that concerned me as an undergraduate. It follows, not insignificant I think, that having finished my studies I too wanted to go off to contribute to 'making the world a better place' – to work for the UN or the EU in order to contribute to the great liberal project of creating a more peaceful world. I wanted to take my role as part of the educated elite that promulgates peace and prosperity around the world. This was a somewhat curious position to adopt – while idealistic and one with some resonance with my social democratic background in optimism for a better world – it was also at odds in many ways with the concern for questions of equality and solidarity that I had been taught to care for at home. Questions of gender, or questions of poverty hardly appeared on my early university agenda – nor in my interests. I was brought into the 'high politics' diplomatic world which concerned many British International Relations scholars. Yet, things were to change and they did quite dramatically, with a change of disciplinary context.

As a masters student I had a fierce turn against my previous ways of thinking. Being taught by Steve Smith, Tim Dunne, Colin Wight and Andrew Linklater at Aberystwyth, I came to question everything and felt great enthusiasm for post-positivist thinking, even and then especially poststructuralist lines of thought. I developed a very fierce emotional reaction to liberal and conservative forms of thinking – which manifested itself in numerous feisty debates with student peers as well as teachers. It was in a sense some of my background values unleashed – with a realization that a lot of the 'disciplinary' thinking that I had been socialized into was in fact quite reactionary.

This was personally challenging time – for the disciplinary context at Aberystwyth, which was more open to critical thinking, had unleashed in me quite an angry critic of liberal universalism and institutionalism. This turn also affected my personal decisions – joining the international institutions to 'save' the world seemed all of a sudden less attractive. Joining the elite class of 'problem-solving' policy analysts did not strike me as attractive, nor did returning to Finland to join the diplomatic service, which had been another ambition in earlier days. Instead I got sucked into the 'black hole' of theory, which I think was in some ways not only a personal or academic decision, but also inadvertently a political decision. Dealing with theory – with feminism, with critical theory, with poststructuralism – was in a sense a political way of resisting the lures of the liberal elites and colonial ways of practicing IR.

Yet, very curiously, during my PhD studies, a rather contradictory development followed. Although I had come to treat IR theory as very political and had brought, I think, my world view and value orientations into a more direct contact with the academic study of IR, I was to turn, once again, at least seemingly, away from the kinds of interests and ideals my world view should have pushed me towards. This is because discussions in philosophy of science, which I came to focus on in my PhD research, were treated as very much non-political in nature, with the pretense of abstractness being central to them. As a result my politics and my philosophy of science work became bifurcated. My politics, my protests against Iraq war, or global poverty, were quite separate from my work on causation. Curiously, I did not reflect much on my own theoretical orientations as reflections of world view. Philosophy of science was presented as, and presents itself as, a by and large apolitical field of study and I by and large accepted this view presented by the disciplinary context.

Yet, this is in after-thought a curious view – and one that I have come to disagree with. Indeed, I have become convinced that despite the veneer of apoliticality actually there is a deep-seated politics to philosophy of science, and my position on causation. I will not go into this in great detail (see Kurki, 2009) but let us just say that it is not, I do not think, an accident that my own philosophical outlook turned to critical realist and Aristotelian directions, conceptual frameworks which allowed an analysis of not only complex forms of causation but also structural forms of causation (Bhaskar, 1979; Kurki, 2008). There is a hidden politics – and also hidden political tensions – to my philosophy of causation, and I suspect there are to many other philosophies of science (Kurki, 2009).

What is most notable about the dynamics we can trace is that disciplinary contexts have played an important role in my research, enabling or disenabling me to engage in particular kinds of IR. What is also notable, however, is that at different time there has been a different relationship between my personal world views and my theoretical orientations. At times there has been an alienated relationship between my world views and IR theory (at Hull), at other times a closer one (MA at Aber), at yet other times an inadvertently and unconsciously complementary relationship (PhD). This tells us a lot about the role of disciplinary discourses in shaping one's thinking, as well as of the tensions and dynamics that take place in one's theory choices. Indeed, let us now try to draw some analytical conclusions from the rather self-indulgent reflections above.

Theoretical upshots

Let me offer reflections on three substantive points with regard to theory choice: on the importance of different causal factors in explaining theory choice, on the tensions and shifts in theory choice, and on the implications of the role of personal world views for IR as a social science.

The first analytical point that arises from the reflections here is that they direct us to consider the possibility that IR theoretical reflections and orientations are indeed deeply

influenced by world views and value-systems we are associated with, even if the causal connections between world views, disciplinary contexts, 'the world' and theory choice are far from singular and mechanistic, but rather complex and dynamic. Thus, a social democratic upbringing has not made me self-evidently an agitator for social democratic alternatives. Yet, I think it is plausible to suggest that my world view is such that I have ended up gravitating in the direction of critical theory and forms of historical materialism eventually, as well as toward left-leaning philosophy of science of critical realism. The disciplinary socialisation, however, has important consequences in filtering ideas and directing our thinking: it can serve as a mediator that either negates or mitigates against our own world views or, at times, can bolster them. The role of the world itself, I think, is secondary – as Ole Waever too has argued (2007) our practices as IR theorists are not directed by developments in 'real world of ir' but rather developments in our perceptions of 'real world of ir' and by the disciplinary structures of 'IR (as a discipline)' (see Waever, 2007).

Second, I think it is important to note that our disciplinary socialization and our world views may sometimes be in conflict – with important implications for our personal coherence as political subjects and, indeed, for the experience of meaningfulness of the research we do. Personally, it would certainly seem that there are periods of time where an uncomfortable alienation has occurred between my personal self and my disciplinary self. This has been alleviated in recent years, but only through much effort to think about the ways in which political undercurrents are already, albeit implicitly, embedded in work I do in the discipline.

We must also be willing to recognize shifts in own views and that there can be tensions within our own work. In my own work for example there have been shifts between more liberal pluralist notions and more socialist notions. I think such tensions are on some level embedded deep into my philosophy of causation (Kurki 2008). I have come to recognize such tensions then and I think you can also see such tensions in the works of many others (for example, many constructivist, positivists etc). We may not be aware of these internal tensions – but self-reflection and further reflection on such underpinnings may reveal this to us with more clarity. The existence of such tensions is not, let me emphasize, necessarily a bad thing – I think it would be unreasonable to expect full coherence of us, and indeed undesirable to do so. Political tensions, and shifts, in our own thought are both inescapable and productive.

But, third, what does this all mean for scientificity of IR scholarship and theory? Is IR theory but political and relativistic playing field or is there evidence out there that makes one perspective superior over another? One's views on the science-art issue, arguably, depend on one's theoretical but also political persuasion. Steve Smith, my supervisor in the past, has always been a staunch advocate of pluralism, seeing IR as literally as a political playing field where a plurality of different perspectives should be allowed to bloom. I am not entirely in agreement with him – and for specific political reasons. As a representative of critical left thinking, I recognize the importance of but also shy away from extreme forms of pluralism. I think theoretical views are not all equal and the preponderance of specific theories is a social fact to be explained. Thus, for me, evidence

does exist to expound why some theories are better than others and also to explain the preponderance of some over others. Thus, in relation to some of the work I am doing now, the dominance of liberal democratic theorising can, I think, be explained as a function of the rise of specific modes of capital power and discursive power and the disablement of alternative discourse in the post-Cold War environment. Evidence can also be found for the weaknesses of liberal democratic theory of the specific kind that dominates now – there are many empirical and conceptual holes in the theory that critical perspectives can fill and explain, if given the room to.

For me, for political reasons I think, simple pluralism without commitment to explaining why some views are better than others is not enough. This leads to a particular take on the role of science. For me as a critical left thinker, can and should still be a science, despite the fact that it can never be an exact science, or an apolitical science, in the sense that the positivists think. It must be a pluralist, and politically and socially reflective science to be a 'strongly objective' science (Harding, 1991).

To conclude

Monteiro and Ruby (2009) have recently argued that we make 'leaps of faith' in how we provide justifications for our IR theorising. I agree we do: both in philosophy of science and IR theorising. Such leaps in my view are closely, although in complex ways, tied to our social and political world views, our disciplinary contexts as well as developments in the world. It follows that exercises in self-reflection such as this, while dangerously close to navel-gazing in some regard, can have productive effects in exposing our own politics and hence also the reason we do IR. Indeed, despite the dangers involved in engaging in such a personalized and non-generalisable level of study of theory choice, the limited insights that can be gained are important in for our ability to productively understand our own role in scientific community and scientific society. Personally, I must admit that reflecting on my politics, and doing more openly political IR research, has been an enlightening experience. It has exposed to me why I do IR research and how this research can impact on society and world politics. Instead of making me despair of IR, it has made me more comfortable with IR and my own role in it as a political/theoretical agitator.

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